Project Work: A Means to Promote Language Content

By Fredericka L. Stoller

In recent years, increasing numbers of language educators have turned to content-based instruction and project work to promote meaningful student engagement with language and content learning. Through content-based instruction, learners develop language skills while simultaneously becoming more knowledgeable citizens of the world. By integrating project work into content- based classrooms, educators create vibrant learning environments that require active student involvement, stimulate higher level thinking skills, and give students responsibility for their own learning. When incorporating project work into content-based classrooms, instructors distance themselves from teacher- dominated instruction and move towards creating a student community of inquiry involving authentic communication, cooperative learning, collaboration, and problem-solving.

In this article, I shall provide a rationale for content-based instruction and demonstrate how project work can be integrated into content-based classrooms. I will then outline the primary characteristics of project work, introduce project work in its various configurations, and present practical guidelines for sequencing and developing a project. It is my hope that language teachers and teacher educators will be able to adapt the ideas presented here to enhance their classroom instruction.

A Rationale for Content-based Instruction

Content-based instruction (CBI) has been used in a variety of language learning contexts for the last 25 years, though its popularity and wider applicability have increased dramatically in the past 10 years. There are numerous practical features of CBI which make it an appealing approach to language instruction:

In a content-based approach, the activities of the language class are specific to the subject matter being taught, and are geared to stimulate students to think and learn through the use of the target language. Such an approach lends itself quite naturally to the integrated teaching of the four traditional language skills. For example, it employs authentic reading materials which require students not only to understand information but to interpret and evaluate it as well. It provides a forum in which students can respond orally to reading and lecture materials. It recognizes that academic writing follows from listening and reading, and thus requires students to synthesize facts and ideas from multiple sources as preparation for writing. In this approach, students are exposed to study skills and learn a variety of language skills which prepare them for the range of academic tasks they will encounter (Brinton, Snow, and Wesche 1989:2).

This quotation reflects a consistent set of descriptions by CBI practitioners who have come to appreciate the many ways that CBI offers ideal conditions for language learning. Research in second language acquisition offers additional support for CBI; yet some of the most persuasive evidence stems from research in educational and cognitive psychology, even though it is somewhat removed from language learning contexts. Worth noting here are four findings from research in educational and cognitive psychology that emphasize the benefits of content-based instruction:

1. Thematically organized materials, typical of content-based classrooms, are easier to remember and learn (Singer 1990).
2. The presentation of coherent and meaningful information, characteristic of well-organized content-based curricula, leads to deeper processing and better learning (Anderson 1990).
3. There is a relationship between student motivation and student interest-common outcomes of content- based classes-and a student's ability to process challenging materials, recall information, and elaborate (Alexander, Kulikowich, and Jetton 1994).
4. Expertise in a topic develops when learners reinvest their knowledge in a sequence of progressively more complex tasks (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1993), feasible in content-based classrooms and usually absent from more traditional language classrooms because of the narrow focus on language rules or limited time on superficially developed and disparate topics (e.g., a curriculum based on a short reading passage on the skyscrapers of New York, followed by a passage on the history of bubble gum, later followed by an essay on the volcanos of the American Northwest).

These empirical research findings, when combined with the practical advantages of integrating content and language learning, provide persuasive arguments in favor of content-based instruction. Language educators who adopt a content-based orientation will find that CBI also allows for the incorporation of explicit language instruction (covering, for example, grammar, conversational gambits, functions, notions, and skills), thereby satisfying students' language and content learning needs in context (see Grabe and Stoller 1997 for a more developed rationale for CBI.)

Project Work as a Natural Extension of Content-based Instruction

Content-based instruction allows for the natural integration of sound language teaching practices such as alternative means of assessment, apprenticeship learning, cooperative learning, integrated-skills instruction, project work, scaffolding, strategy training, and the use of graphic organizers. Although each of these teaching practices is worthy of extended discussion, this article will focus solely on project work and its role in content-based instructional formats.

Some language professionals equate project work with in-class group work, cooperative learning, or more elaborate task-based activities. It is the purpose of this article, however, to illustrate how project work represents much more than group work per se. Project-based learning should be viewed as a versatile vehicle for fully integrated language and content learning, making it a viable option for language educators working in a variety of instructional settings

including general English, English for academic purposes (EAP), English for specific purposes (ESP), and English for occupational/vocational/professional purposes, in addition to pre-service and in-service teacher training. Project work is viewed by most of its advocates "not as a replacement for other teaching methods" but rather as "an approach to learning which complements mainstream methods and which can be used with almost all levels, ages and abilities of students" (Haines 1989:1).

In classrooms where a commitment has been made to content learning as well as language learning (i.e., content-based classrooms), project work is particularly effective because it represents a natural extension of what is already taking place in class. So, for example, in an EAP class structured around environmental topics, a project which involves the development of poster displays suggesting ways in which the students' school might engage in more environmentally sound practices would be a natural outcome of the content and language learning activities taking place in class. In a vocational English course focusing on tourism, the development of a promotional brochure highlighting points of interest in the students' home town would be a natural outgrowth of the curriculum. In a general English course focusing on cities in English- speaking countries, students could create public bulletin board displays with pictorial and written information on targeted cities. In an ESP course on international law, a written report comparing and contrasting the American legal system and the students' home country legal system represents a meaningful project that allows for the synthesis, analysis, and evaluation of course content. Project work is equally effective in teacher training courses. Thus, in a course on materials development, a student-generated handbook comprising generic exercises for language skills practice at different levels of English proficiency represents a useful and practical project that can be used later as a teacher-reference tool. The hands-on experience that the teachers-in-training have with project-based learning could, in turn, transfer to their own lesson planning in the future (J. Mohanraj, personal communication, June 5, 1997). These examples represent only some of the possibilities available to teachers and students when incorporating project work into content-based curricula.

The Primary Characteristics of Project Work

Project work has been described by a number of language educators, including Carter and Thomas (1986), Ferragatti and Carminati (1984), Fried-Booth (1982, 1986), Haines (1989), Legutke (1984, 1985), Legutke and Thiel (1983), Papandreou (1994), Sheppard and Stoller (1995), and Ward (1988). Although each of these educators has approached project work from a different perspective, project work, in its various configurations, shares these features:

1. Project work focuses on content learning rather than on specific language targets. Real-world subject matter and topics of interest to students can become central to projects.
2. Project work is student centered, though the teacher plays a major role in offering support and guidance throughout the process.
3. Project work is cooperative rather than competitive. Students can work on their own, in small groups, or as a class to complete a project, sharing resources, ideas, and expertise along the way.

4. Project work leads to the authentic integration of skills and processing of information from varied sources, mirroring real-life tasks.
5. Project work culminates in an end product (e.g., an oral presentation, a poster session, a bulletin board display, a report, or a stage performance) that can be shared with others, giving the project a real purpose. The value of the project, however, lies not just in the final product but in the process of working towards the end point. Thus, project work has both a process and product orientation, and provides students with opportunities to focus on fluency and accuracy at different project-work stages.
6. Project work is potentially motivating, stimulating, empowering, and challenging. It usually results in building student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy as well as improving students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities.

Project Work and its Various Configurations

Though similar in many ways, project work can take on diverse configurations. The most suitable format for a given context depends on a variety of factors including curricular objectives, course expectations, students' proficiency levels, student interests, time constraints, and availability of materials. A review of different types of projects will demonstrate the scope, versatility, and adaptability of project work.

Projects differ in the degree to which the teacher and students decide on the nature and sequencing of project-related activities, as demonstrated by three types of projects proposed by Henry (1994): *Structured projects* are determined, specified, and organized by the teacher in terms of topic, materials, methodology, and presentation; *unstructured projects* are defined largely by students themselves; and *semi-structured projects* are defined and organized in part by the teacher and in part by students.

Projects can be linked to real-world concerns (e.g., when Italian ESP students designed a leaflet for foreign travel agencies outside of Europe describing the advantages of the European Community's standardization of electrical systems as a step towards European unity (see Footnote 1 below) or when general English students at an international school created a public bulletin board display-with photos and text based on extensive interviews with EFL faculty-introducing new students to their EFL teachers [see Footnote 2 below]). Projects can also be linked to simulated real-world issues (e.g., when EAP students staged a debate on the pros and cons of censorship as part of a content-based unit on censorship [see Footnote 3 below]). Projects can also be tied to student interests, with or without real-world significance (e.g., when general English students planned an elaborate field trip to an international airport where they conducted extensive interviews and videotaping of international travelers; see Ferragatti and Carminati 1984; Legutke 1984, 1985; Legutke and Thiel 1983).

Projects can also differ in data collection techniques and sources of information as demonstrated by these project types: *Research projects* necessitate the gathering of information through library research. Similarly, *text projects* involve encounters with "texts" (e.g., literature, reports, news media, video and audio material, or computer-based information) rather than people.

Correspondence projects require communication with individuals (or businesses, governmental agencies, schools, or chambers of commerce) to solicit information by means of letters, faxes, phone calls, or electronic mail. *Survey projects* entail creating a survey instrument and then collecting and analyzing data from "informants." *Encounter projects* result in face-to-face contact with guest speakers or individuals outside the classroom (see Haines 1989, and Legutke and Thomas 1991, for a more detailed description of these project types.)

Projects may also differ in the ways that information is "reported" as part of a culminating activity (see Haines 1989). *Production projects* involve the creation of bulletin board displays, videos, radio programs, poster sessions, written reports, photo essays, letters, handbooks, brochures, banquet menus, travel itineraries, and so forth. *Performance projects* can take shape as staged debates, oral presentations, theatrical performances, food fairs, or fashion shows. *Organizational projects* entail the planning and formation of a club, conversation table, or conversation partner program.

Whatever the configuration, projects can be carried out intensively over a short period of time or extended over a few weeks, or a full semester; they can be completed by students individually, in small groups, or as a class; and they can take place entirely within the confines of the classroom or can extend beyond the walls of the classroom into the community or with others via different forms of correspondence.

Incorporating Project Work into the Classroom

Project work, whether it is integrated into a content-based thematic unit or introduced as a special sequence of activities in a more traditional classroom, requires multiple stages of development to succeed. Fried- Booth (1986) proposes an easy-to-follow multiple-step process that can guide teachers in developing and sequencing project work for their classrooms. Similarly, Haines (1989) presents a straightforward and useful description of project work and the steps needed for successful implementation. Both the Fried- Booth and Haines volumes include detailed de- scriptions of projects that can be adapted for many language classroom settings. They also offer suggestions for introducing students to the idea of student- centered activity through bridging strategies (Fried-Booth 1986) and lead-in activities (Haines 1989), particularly useful if one's students are unfamiliar with project work and its emphasis on student initiative and autonomy.

Sheppard and Stoller (1995) proposed an eight-step sequence of activities for orchestrating project work in an ESP classroom. That model has been fine-tuned, after testing it in a variety of language classrooms and teacher training courses. The new 10-step sequence (see Figure 1 below) is described here in detail. The revised model gives easy-to-manage structure to project work and guides teachers and students in developing meaningful projects that facilitate content learning and provide opportunities for explicit language instruction at critical moments in the project. These language "intervention" lessons will help students complete their projects successfully and will be appreciated by students because of their immediate applicability and relevance. The language intervention steps (IV, VI, and VIII) are optional in teacher education courses, depending on the language proficiency and needs of the teachers-in-training.

To understand the function of each proposed step, imagine a content-based EAP classroom focusing on American elections (see Footnote 4 below). (A parallel discussion could be developed for classrooms- general English, EAP, ESP, vocational English, and so forth-focusing on American institutions, demography, energy alternatives, farming safety, fashion design, health, the ideal automobile, insects, Native Americans, pollution, rain forests, the solar system, etc.). The thematic unit is structured so that the instructor and students can explore various topics: the branches of the U.S. government, the election process, political parties with their corresponding ideologies and platforms, and voting behaviors. Information on these topics is introduced by means of readings from books, newspapers, and news magazines; graphs and charts; videos; dicto-comps; teacher-generated lectures and note-taking activities; formal and informal class discussions and group work; guest speakers; and U.S. political party promotional materials. While exploring these topics and developing some level of expertise about American elections, students improve their listening and note-taking skills, reading proficiency, accuracy and fluency in speaking, writing abilities, study skills, and critical thinking skills. To frame this discussion, it should be noted that the thematic unit is embedded into an integrated-skills, content-based course with the following objectives:

1. To encourage students to use language to learn something new about topics of interest
2. To prepare students to learn subject matter through English
3. To expose students to content from a variety of informational sources to help students improve their academic language and study skills
4. To provide students with contextualized resources for understanding language and content
5. To simulate the rigors of academic courses in a sheltered environment
6. To promote students' self-reliance and engagement with learning

After being introduced to the theme unit and its most fundamental vocabulary and concepts, the instructor introduces a semi-structured project to the class that will be woven into class lessons and that will span the length of the thematic unit. The teacher has already made some decisions about the project: Students will stage a simulated political debate that addresses contemporary political and social issues. To stimulate interest and a sense of ownership in the process, the instructor will work with the students to decide on the issues to be debated, the number and types of political parties represented in the debate, the format of the debate, and a means for judging the debate. To move from the initial conception of the project to the actual debate, the instructor and students follow 10 steps.

Step I: Students and instructor agree on a theme for the project

To set the stage, the instructor gives students an opportunity to shape the project and develop some sense of shared perspective and commitment. Even if the teacher has decided to pursue a structured project, for which most decisions are made by the instructor, students can be encouraged to fine-tune the project theme. While shaping the project together, students often find it useful to make reference to previous readings, videos, discussions, and classroom activities.

During the initial stage of the American elections project, students brainstormed issues that might be featured in an American political debate. Through discussion and negotiation, students

identified the following issues for consideration: taxes, crime, welfare, gun control, abortion, family leave, foreign policy, affirmative action, election reform, immigration, censorship, the environment, and environmental legislation. By pooling resources, information, ideas, and relevant experiences, students narrowed the scope of the debate by choosing select issues from within the larger set of brainstormed issues that were of special interest to the class and that were "researchable," meaning that resources were available or accessible for student research.

Step II: Students and instructor determine the final outcome

Whereas the first stage of project work involves establishing a starting point, the second step entails defining an end point, or the final outcome. Students and instructor consider the nature of the project, its objectives, and the most appropriate means to culminate the project. They can choose from a variety of options including a written report, letter, poster or bulletin board display, debate, oral presentation, information packet, handbook, scrapbook, brochure, newspaper, or video.

In the case of the American elections proj-ect, the teacher had already decided that the final outcome would be a public debate between two fictitious political parties. In this second stage of the project, students took part in defining the nature and format of the debate and designating the intended audience. With the help of the instructor, it was decided that the class would divide itself into five topical teams, each one responsible for debating one of the issues previously identified; topical teams would generate debatable propositions on their designated issue and then divide into two subgroups so that each side of the issue could be represented in the debate. Students would also be grouped into two political parties, which they would name themselves, with one side of each issue represented in the political party; the issues and corresponding perspectives would form the party platform. The 40-minute debate was structured as follows:

Opening remarks	
Representative from first party	1 minute
Representative from second party	1 minute
Issue 1	
Party representative who supports proposition	2 minutes
Party representative who opposes proposition	2 minutes
Issue 1 rebuttals	
Another party representative who supports proposition	1 minute
Another party representative who opposes proposition	1 minute
Issues 2- 5	
(Same pattern as Issue 1)	24 minutes

Questions and answers from audience to other party representatives	6 minutes
Closing remarks	
Speaker from second party	1 minute
Speaker from first party	1 minute

The class decided to invite English-speaking friends and graduate students enrolled in a TESL/TEFL program to serve as their audience and judges. It was decided that the audience would vote on which team presented the most persuasive arguments during the debate.

Step III: Students and instructor structure the project

After students have determined the starting and end points of the project, they need to structure the "body" of the project. Questions that students should consider are as follows: What information is needed to complete the project? How can that information be obtained (e.g., a library search, interviews, letters, faxes, e-mail, the World Wide Web, field trips, viewing of videos)? How will the information, once gathered, be compiled and analyzed? What role does each student play in the evolution of the project (i.e., Who does what?)? What time line will students follow to get from the starting point to the end point? The answers to many of these questions depend on the location of the language program and the types of information that are within easy reach (perhaps collected beforehand by the instructor) and those that must be solicited by "snail" mail, electronic mail, fax, or phone call.

In this American elections project, it was decided that topical team members would work together to gather information that could be used by supporters and opponents of their proposition before actually taking sides. In this way, topical team members would share all their resources, later using it to take a stand and plan a rebuttal. Rather than keeping information secret, as might be done in a real debate setting, the idea was to establish a cooperative and collaborative working atmosphere. Topical team members would work as a group to compile gathered information (in the form of facts, opinions, and statistics) and then analyze it to determine what was most suitable to the sides supporting and opposing their proposition. At this point, students would subdivide into groups of supporters and opponents and then work separately (and with other party members) to prepare for the debate. At that time, students would decide on different roles: the spokespersons, the "artists" who would create visuals (charts and graphs) to be used during the debate, and so forth.

Step IV: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of informationgathering

It is at this point that the instructor determines, perhaps in consultation with the students, the language demands of the information gathering stage (Step V). The instructor can then plan language instruction activities to prepare students for information gathering tasks. If, for example, students are going to collect information by means of interviews, the instructor might plan exercises on question formation, introduce conversational gambits, and set aside time for role-plays to provide feedback on pronunciation and to allow students to practice listening and note-taking or audio-taping. If, on the other hand, students are going to use a library to gather materials, the instructor might review steps for finding resources and practice skimming and note-taking with sample texts. The teacher may also help students devise a grid for organized

data collection. If students will be writing letters to solicit information for their proj-ect, the teacher can introduce or review letter formatting conventions and audience considerations, including levels of formality and word choice. If students will be using the World Wide Web for information gathering, the instructor can review the efficient use of this technology.

Step V: Students gather information

Students, having practiced the language, skills, and strategies needed to gather information, are now ready to collect information and organize it so that others on their team can make sense of it. In the project highlighted here, students reread course readings in search for relevant materials, used the library to look for new support, wrote letters to political parties to determine their stand on the issue under consideration, looked into finding organizations supporting or opposing some aspect of their proposition (e.g., gun control groups) and solicited information that could possibly be used in the debate. During this data-gathering stage, the instructor, knowing the issues and propositions being researched, also brought in information that was potentially relevant, in the form of readings, videos, dicto-comps, and teacher-generated lectures, for student consideration.

Step VI: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of compiling andanalyzing data

After successfully gathering information, students are then confronted with the challenges of organizing and synthesizing information that may have been collected from different sources and by different individuals. The instructor can prepare students for the demands of the compilation and analysis stage by setting up sessions in which students organize sets of materials, and then evaluate, analyze, and interpret them with an eye towards determining which are most appropriate for the supporters and opponents of a given proposition. Introducing students to graphic representations (e.g., grids and charts) that might highlight relationships among ideas is particularly useful at this point.

Step VII: Students compile and analyze information

With the assistance of a variety of organizational techniques (including graphic organizers), students compile and analyze information to identify data that are particularly relevant to the project. Student teams weigh the value of the collected data, discarding some, because of their inappropriacy for the project, and keeping the rest. Students determine which information represents primary "evidence" for the supporters and opponents of their proposition. It is at this point that topical teams divide themselves into two groups and begin to work separately to build the strongest case for the debate.

Step VIII: Instructor prepares students for the language demands of the culminating activity

At this point in the development of the project, instructors can bring in language improvement activities to help students succeed with the presentation of their final products. This might entail practicing oral presentation skills and receiving feedback on voice projection, pronunciation, organization of ideas, and eye contact. It may involve editing and revising written reports, letters, or bulletin board display text. In the case of the American elections debate project, the instructor focused on conversational gambits to be used during the debate to indicate polite disagreement and to offer divergent perspectives (see Mach, Stoller, and Tardy 1997). Students practiced their oral presentations and tried to hypothesize the questions that they would be asked by opponents.

They timed each other and gave each other feedback on content, word choice, persuasiveness, and intonation. Students also worked with the "artists" in their groups to finalize visual displays, to make sure they were grammatically correct and easily interpretable by the audience. Students also created a flyer announcing the debate (see appendix), which served as an invitation to and reminder for audience members.

Step IX: Students present final product
Students are now ready to present the final outcome of their projects. In the American elections project, students staged their debate in front of an audience, following the format previously agreed upon. The audience voted on the persuasiveness of each political party, and a winner was declared. In the case described here, the debate was videotaped so that students could later review their debate performances and receive feedback from the instructor and their peers.

Step X: Students evaluate the project
Although students and instructors, alike, often view the presentation of the final product as the very last stage in the project work process, it is worthwhile to ask students to reflect on the experience as the last and final step. Students can reflect on the language that they mastered to complete the project, the content that they learned about the targeted theme (in the case highlighted here that would be American elections, party platforms, and the role of debate in the election process), the steps that they followed to complete the project, and the effectiveness of their final product. Students can be asked how they might proceed differently the next time or what suggestions they have for future project work endeavors. Through these reflective activities, students realize how much they have learned and the teacher benefits from students' insights for future classroom projects.

Conclusion

Content-based instruction and project work provide two means for making English language classrooms more vibrant environments for learning and collaboration. Project work, however, need not be limited to content-based language classes. Language teachers in more traditional classrooms can diversify instruction with an occasional project. Similarly, teacher educators can integrate projects into their courses to reinforce important pedagogical issues and provide trainees with hands-on experience, a process that may be integrated into future classrooms of their own.

Whether a project centers around American elections, demography, peace I37 education, syllabus design, or methodology, students of varying levels and needs can benefit from the empowering experience that results from participation and collaboration in a project. And though project work may be easier to implement in second language settings because of more readily accessible content resources, teachers in foreign language settings have already proven that with adaptation and creativity, the project approach can be successful and rewarding for teachers and students alike.

Fredricka L. Stoller is an associate professor in the ESL/applied linguistics programs at Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, Arizona. She is also director of the Program in Intensive English at the same university.

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Figure 1

Developing a Project in a Language Classroom

Step I: Agree on a theme for the project
Step II: Determine the final outcome
Step III: Structure the project
..... **Step lV:** Prepare students for the language demands of Step V **.....**
Step V: Gather information
..... **Step VI:** Prepare students for the language demands of Step VII **.....**
Step VII: Compile and analyze information
..... **Step VIII:** Step : Prepare students for the language demands of Step IX **.....**
Step IX: Present final product
Step X: Evaluate the project

Footnote 1

1. This ESP project, titled "Connecting Europe with a New Plug," was designed by Italian instructors Laura Chiozzotto, Innocenza Giannasi, Laura Paperini, and Antonio Ragosa for students of electrotechnics and electronics

Footnote 2

2. A project similar to this, titled "Wall Newspaper: Know Your EFL Teachers," was developed by Kris Hoover for students at the International School in Bangkok, Thailand. The project is an adaptation of Fried-Booth's (1986) "Staff Portrait Gallery" project (p. 21- 23).

Footnote 3

3. This debate was the culminating activity in a theme-based unit on censorship, designed by Kevin Eyraud and Gillian Giles in collaboration with their EAP students, at Northern Arizona University.

Footnote 4

4. The thematic unit outlined here is fashioned after a similar unit developed and implemented by Gillian Giles and Susan Koenig at Northern Arizona University.